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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000296

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [ETRD](#) [TU](#) [IS](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: TURKISH PM ERDOGAN'S VISIT TO SYRIA

REF: A. 04 ANKARA 226

[B](#). 04 ANKARA 4196

[C](#). 04 ANKARA 6258

[D](#). 04 ANKARA 0248

(U) Classified by DCM Robert Deutsch, E.O. 12958, reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Turks, led by PM Erdogan, FonMin Gul, and chief foreign policy advisor Davutoglu, are selling improved relations with Syria as a major foreign policy success. GOT leaders cast Turkey as a channel of communication for the U.S. and Israel with Syria and as a friend that can support economic reform. At the same time our GOT interlocutors view Assad's control as too fragile to sustain anything but economic reform. In this context, Erdogan has promoted his Dec. 22-23 visit to Damascus and Aleppo as a huge step forward. Erdogan reportedly raised Iraq and Middle East peace issues, but apparently received nothing new from Assad. MFA contact spun the signing of a free trade agreement as "the highlight" of the visit. We pushed back that this is the wrong approach to take with Syria and will continue to urge the GOT not to ratify it. End summary.

Warming Trend

[1](#)2. (C) Under the influence of islam oriented chief foreign policy advisor Ahmet Davutoglu, PM Erdogan and FonMin Gul have promoted improved relations with Syria as a major achievement of the ruling AKP government. While relations have been on an upward trend since hitting bottom in 1998, Bashir Assad's Jan. 2004 visit to Turkey (ref A) signaled an acceleration. As part of a broad push to ease tensions with its neighbors, Turkey has focused on developing political, cultural, economic -- but not military -- ties with Syria (ref B). Syrian PM al-Utri and FonMin al-Shara came to Turkey in July. In October, Turkey helped Syria extinguish a serious forest fire near the border (ref C). PM Erdogan received Syrian Baath Party Deputy SecGen al-Ahmar in November.

"The Syrians Need Friends"

[1](#)3. (C) MFA Middle East Department Head Bozay, who accompanied Erdogan to Damascus, proclaimed the visit a success. He asserted that Syria feels isolated and concerned by the prospect of U.S. action against it. "The Syrians need friends," he added. The Syrians hope Turkey can be a channel of communication. According to Bozay, the Syrians want to show they are not supporting terror.

[1](#)4. (C) (C) Bozay said the Turkish Embassy in Damascus views Assad as trying to reform Syria, especially economically, against an older generation of Baathists. The Embassy views Assad's control as fragile; too delicate, added Bozay, to enable him to engage in political reform. According to ref B, at least some in Turkey's military share this view. Bozay asserted that the Syrians are engaging in economic reforms and they see Turkey as a potential partner in that effort. Erdogan asked the Syrians to remove obstacles to Turkish investors; the Syrians asked the Turks for advice on opening a stock exchange.

Iraq

[1](#)5. (C) On Iraq elections, Erdogan reportedly told Assad that Turkey supports Sunni Arab participation and Iranian non-interference. Assad mostly just listened, according to Bozay. Assad expressed concern about Iranian influence and the possibility of an "unbalanced" election result favoring Shiites.

[1](#)6. (C) Bozay said Erdogan did not "directly" raise with Assad the issue of Baath terrorist infiltration of Iraq from Syria, but did tell Assad that terror and infiltration should stop; Assad replied he was doing the best he could. Bozay speculated that Erdogan may have also raised the issue in his one-on-one meeting with Assad, which Bozay did not attend.

Middle East Peace

17. (C) Erdogan reportedly raised Palestinian elections, telling Assad extremism should not be encouraged at this delicate stage, and that elected Palestinian leaders should be supported. Erdogan did not raise the issue of Palestinian rejectionist groups' offices in Syria, Bozay said. Assad agreed the elections were important but expressed skepticism about whether Israel would allow them to proceed freely or would cooperate with the new Palestinian government.

18. (C) Bozay said Erdogan raised the case of return of the remains of Eli Cohen (executed as an Israeli spy by the Syrians in 1965) but none of the other cases of Israelis missing in Lebanon about whom the Syrians presumably have information. Assad reportedly replied he would look into the Cohen case and that this is solvable in the context of an overall settlement between Israel and Syria. Israeli DCM Nahshon told us subsequently that Israel asked Erdogan to raise the Cohen case as a way to test the Turks. Nahshon said the Israelis see the contradiction between Bashir Assad's non-answer (which, given the centrality of the Cohen case to Hafez al-Assad's justification for his regime, Israel interprets as a continuing "no") and the Turks' -- principally Davutoglu's -- assertion that the Syrians have not closed the door as a reflection of the Turks' lack of capacity to play a meaningful role.

19. (C) Bozay was unsure whether Erdogan raised Syrian occupation of Lebanon. The MFA's prepared talking points included Lebanon, but Erdogan did not raise the subject in the expanded meeting with Assad. Bozay again speculated Erdogan may have done so in the one-on-one meeting.

Free Trade Agreement

10. (C) Bozay painted the signing of the Turkey/Syria free trade agreement as "the highlight" of the visit. We told Bozay that the U.S. sees the agreement as unhelpful in view of Syria's harboring of Iraqi former regime elements and terrorists; harboring Palestinian rejectionists; and occupying Lebanon. Bozay averred the agreement is designed both to encourage Syrian economic reform, which in turn, he asserted, will lead to political reform, and to keep Turkey engaged with Syria. DCM also raised the FTA with DG for Middle East, Oguz Cellikkol, underlining our view that improved dialogue and trade benefits should be contingent on positive responses from Syria on core issues such as support for terrorists, in both the Iraq and MEPP contexts. Cellikkol agreed it was essential to give the Syrians a clear roadmap of requirements, but he also insisted that Turkey's warming relationship could have a positive impact in moving Assad forward on more difficult issues.

11. (C) We told Bozay that the U.S. thinks this is the wrong way to approach Syria. Concrete messages to stop these activities are more effective in changing Syrian behavior. We reminded Bozay that when Syria was harboring PKK leader Ocalan, Turkey delivered a clear message in late 1998 to Syria to expel Ocalan and backed it with a promise of military action. This approach worked: Syria expelled Ocalan.

12. (C) Bozay denied press reports that the FTA includes Syrian acknowledgment that the disputed Turkish province of Hatay (called Alexandretta by the Syrians) belongs to Turkey. Both sides pointedly refused to comment on the topic during the visit. Bozay said agreements like the FTA and a transboundary water agreement on the Orontes (Asi) reached during the visit (ref D) would eventually amount to "de facto" resolution of the dispute.

13. (C) Bozay told us the agreement still must be ratified by the Turkish parliament. We will continue to reiterate our opposition to the FTA and urge no ratification until Syria changes its behavior on Iraq, Palestinian rejectionists, Lebanon, and other issues of concern to the U.S.

Comment

14. (C) The GOT's mixing wishful thinking and a form of neo-Ottoman nostalgia in and approval to Syria (in this regard, several contacts, including "Sabah" Ankara bureau chief Asli Aydintasbas, have contrasted Erdogan's relaxed, at-home behavior in Damascus and Aleppo with his competitive body language in Western European capitals). This Turkish love-fest with Bashir Assad and Syria (which has a reflection on the law-enforcement and counter-terror areas) will soon conflict with Turkey's attempts to repair the public side of its relations with Israel (septel). It remains to be seen what concretely is produced following the rhetoric. End comment.

15. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

